

In Touch with the Lord: U.S. Army Chaplains of the Christian Faith in World War II

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On February 3, 1943, four U.S. Army chaplains from different religious backgrounds made the ultimate sacrifice while working together to save as many American lives as possible. These four chaplains consisted of two Protestant ministers, one Catholic priest, and one Jewish rabbi. Their names were George Fox, Clark Poling, John Washington, and Alexander Goode. When the *SS Dorchester*, a U.S. Army transport ship, was struck by a torpedo from a German U-boat in the North Atlantic and began sinking, these four chaplains helped the men evacuate. They calmed them down, assisted the wounded, led them to the deck of the ship, and passed out life jackets. Survivors watched as they went down with the ship arm-in-arm, praying and singing hymns until they were consumed by the icy waters. Only 230 out of 902 men survived, but many more would likely have drowned if the Four Chaplains had not been there.¹ While the Four Chaplains are undoubtedly the most well-known U.S. military chaplains of World War II, there are others who deserve to be remembered for their service. Specifically, the Christian chaplains of the U.S. Army during World War II greatly impacted the soldiers that they served by caring for their spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

The American military chaplaincy has its roots in the colonial militias of the seventeenth century and the American Revolution of the late eighteenth century. In 1775, the Second Continental Congress voted to authorize a paid military chaplaincy, and the first official, mostly Protestant, chaplains began serving under George Washington in the Continental Army.² American Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish chaplains have served God and their country in every war from the American Revolution to the War on Terror.³ Christian chaplains, including those

¹ John Brinsfield, “Chaplain Corps History: The Four Chaplains,” U.S. Army, January 28, 2014, https://www.army.mil/article/34090/chaplain_corps_history_the_four_chaplains.

² Robert C. Doyle, *Men of God, Men of War: Military Chaplains as Ministers, Warriors, and Prisoners* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2024), 8-13.

³ *Ibid.*, xii.

from traditional Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church, accounted for approximately eighty-five percent of all U.S. military chaplains in World War II.⁴ This heritage points to the preponderance of the Christian faith in the United States, even amidst times of war. The Christian chaplains of the U.S. Army during World War II glorified God through their ministry and deserve to be remembered as part of America's Christian heritage.

The Army chaplaincy developed significantly in World War II under the leadership of William R. Arnold, who was the Army Chief of Chaplains from 1937 to 1945. Arnold was the first Catholic priest to serve as Chief of Chaplains and the first to achieve the rank of Brigadier and then Major General. Robert L. Gushwa says that Arnold "spoke with vigor, certainty, and conviction" and that he possessed "the personality of a leader and the ability of an extremely competent administrator."⁵ Arnold believed that seven important aspects of the chaplaincy during the war were "Procurement and Distribution of Chaplains; Training; Chapels; Cooperation with Church Groups; Publicity; Cooperation of Military Authorities."⁶ With these traits and priorities, Arnold successfully equipped his chaplains to serve the U.S. Army during the deadliest war in human history.

Arnold reactivated the Chaplain School, formerly located at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and moved it to Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, early in 1942. The school quickly outgrew the facilities at Fort Benjamin Harrison and moved to Harvard University in August 1942, where it remained for the next two years. The Chaplain School finished out the war at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and then Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Army chaplains received two hundred hours

⁴ Robert L. Gushwa, *The Best and Worst of Times: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1920-1945* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1977), 208-9, https://thechaplainkit.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/usarmychaplaincyhistory4-best_and_worst_of_times.pdf.

⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁶ Ibid., 106.

of instruction in military organization, graves registration, first aid, chaplain activities, and other subjects. The Chaplain School graduated 8,183 chaplains by the end of the war.⁷ Arnold led the Army chaplaincy through a period of exponential growth and intense service with efficient administration and strong leadership skills.

The Christian Army chaplains, themselves, performed their numerous duties selflessly by tending to the spiritual and physical needs of the soldiers under their care. Monsignor Terence Patrick Finnegan, a Catholic priest and Army chaplain, witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. In a 1974 interview, Finnegan discussed the severe shortage of chaplains in the Pacific at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and said that he was the only Catholic priest available. There were even a couple of days where he had to conduct Protestant services as well as Catholic.⁸ In a 1989 interview, Finnegan described how he did not sleep for several days after the Japanese bombing because he was ministering to the dying men at Pearl Harbor. He said, “I was up for two days and three nights without sleep...When they first took the kids into the hospital, where I necessarily gravitated to, they were all blood and dirt and what have you.”⁹ He walked up and down the line of the wounded multiple times and made sure that all of the injured Catholic servicemen received the sacrament of confession multiple times a day. It was about three days before another Catholic chaplain arrived at Pearl Harbor to assist him.¹⁰ Finnegan worked incredibly hard on those fateful December days in 1941 with very little sleep.

Finnegan later served with the 25th Infantry Division on the Solomon Islands during the Guadalcanal Campaign from December 1942 to February 1943. He talked about some of the

⁷ Ibid., 107-10.

⁸ Terence Patrick Finnegan, interview by Thomas D. McCall, August 10, 1974, transcript, 19, Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.64946/>.

⁹ Terence Patrick Finnegan, interview by Margaret Schenk, 1989, Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.64946/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

horrors he saw during the Guadalcanal campaign. Finnegan said, “I remember the only outstanding incident was the fact that the Japanese had murdered two nuns and two priests on the island...One priest had his arm partially gone. They [the Japanese] had broken it off...We buried them, and the people [natives] came to the Mass. I said Mass for them, and from then on, the people looked to us for help, of course.”¹¹ Finnegan not only helped his own men on Guadalcanal, but he also cared for the natives by burying the dead missionaries and saying Mass for them. After leaving Guadalcanal and recovering from an illness, Finnegan was sent all the way to Caserta, Italy, and served the remainder of the war in the Mediterranean theater. Finnegan later achieved the rank of Major General and was promoted to be the Air Force Chief of Chaplains in 1958.¹² At Pearl Harbor and Guadalcanal, Finnegan consistently put the needs of others before his own and cared for his men and even the native people he encountered.

Rev. Eugene Lewis Daniel Jr. was a Presbyterian chaplain in the 34th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army. In February 1943, he was captured in North Africa by German soldiers and spent the remainder of the war in several prisoner of war (POW) camps. One of these camps, Stalag 17B, was the basis for the film *Stalag 17*. Another, Stalag Luft III, was the camp that inspired the film *The Great Escape*.¹³ In a 1980 lecture, Daniel Jr. recalled how he led a short prayer service for his fellow POWs in Tunis while they were awaiting transport to Germany. Each of the Sunday sermons that he regularly preached in the camps had to be approved in advance by German censors and could not contain any criticisms of Adolf Hitler or the Nazi regime. He also mentioned how throughout his time in captivity, he taught Bible classes to the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John P. Snodgrass, *Terence Patrick Finnegan Collection*, AFC 2001/001, Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.64946/>.

¹³ John P. Snodgrass, *Eugene Lewis Daniel, Jr. Collection*, AFC 2001/001, Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.12668/>.

American captives three times a week because their knowledge of the Bible was abysmal. Another reason why he taught these classes was to keep his men's minds sharp so that they were not driven to insanity by the tortuous boredom and starvation diet of the camps. Daniel Jr. said, "Many men found the Lord Jesus Christ while they were there in that prison camp."¹⁴ His ministry to his fellow POWs in Nazi Germany, which included praying with them, preaching for them, and teaching them, had a remarkable impact.

In a 1993 lecture, Daniel Jr. explained what a chaplain does for the military and shared some of the struggles he experienced with his own faith while in captivity. He said that in the U.S. military during World War II, there was supposed to be at least one chaplain for every one thousand servicemen. However, he cared for around three thousand Army soldiers and many more in the POW camps. He also told his audience that a military chaplain must accompany his men into combat while remaining unarmed and occasionally render emergency medical care to wounded soldiers. In fact, Daniel Jr. was captured in North Africa while aiding crippled German POWs who had been left behind by retreating American forces. He went on to share that "a chaplain better be in touch with the Lord" to keep his spirits up when faced with hardship. However, he admitted that there were days when his faith was weak and he did not seek the Lord's strength. On those days, he said, "I preached whether I felt like it or not."¹⁵ Despite these struggles, Daniel Jr. performed the duties of a U.S. military chaplain admirably while in captivity and led many of his men to faith in Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Eugene Lewis Daniel Jr., "Christian Faith and Patriotism in German War Prisoner Camps" (lecture, February 3, 1980), Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.64946/>.

¹⁵ Eugene Lewis Daniel Jr., "POWs in World War II" (lecture, May 13, 1993), Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.64946/>.

Rev. John Grady Burkhalter, a Baptist Army chaplain, served on the Front with the 1st Infantry Division during the invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. Burkhalter landed with the “Fighting First Division” on Omaha Beach on D-Day, served on the Front for over eight months, and was wounded during the Battle of the Bulge. He was known for his firm handshake, kind blue eyes, and soft-spoken manner.¹⁶ Burkhalter described his experience landing on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944. His reflection, originally penned in a letter to his wife, was published in the *Florida Baptist Witness* on August 24, 1944, under the title “God Was On The Beach D-Day.” Besides noting the horrors he witnessed upon hitting the beach and how he crawled inland, Burkhalter recalled how he felt closest to God in the most dangerous moments of D-Day. He prayed hard for the suffering men all around him, as well as for the safety of his division. He mentioned that on the second day, he and his assistants worked to locate the bodies of dead soldiers, American and German, and put them in mattress covers for the rear echelons to recover.¹⁷ Thus, he did his duty as a chaplain under intense pressure on one of the most dangerous days of the war.

For Burkhalter, his faith in God is what sustained him on D-Day. He wrote, “Nobody can love God better than when he is looking death square in the face and talks to God and then sees God come to the rescue...Yes, there were a lot of miracles on the beach that day. God was on the beach D-Day; I know He was because I was talking with Him.”¹⁸ This intimacy with the Lord enabled Burkhalter to carry out his responsibilities and serve the men under his care. In the weeks following D-Day, Burkhalter acquired a jeep and a trailer which stored his desk and

¹⁶ R. V. Gordon, “Front-Line Chaplain: John Grady Burkhalter,” Fort Leavenworth, KS, *Burkhalter Collection*, Liberty University Chaplains Museum.

¹⁷ John G. Burkhalter, “God Was On The Beach D-Day,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, August 24, 1944, *Burkhalter Collection*, Liberty University Chaplains Museum.

¹⁸ Ibid.

typewriter, his song books, and his organ. He was also assigned a clerk and four assistants. Burkhalter conducted field services for soldiers of the 1st Division in France, and it was reported that during these services under the trees, “the Lord has been very real as they felt His presence there.”¹⁹ Burkhalter and other Army chaplains made a big difference in their divisions by performing a wide range of tasks in combat zones for the good of their soldiers.

Additionally, Burkhalter wrote letters to the family members of fallen soldiers from his division. After recovering from an injury sustained during the Battle of the Bulge, he joined the 2nd Infantry Division in Germany and Czechoslovakia.²⁰ On May 29, 1945, while stationed at Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, Burkhalter sent a letter to a woman named Mrs. Haven. Her son, Pvt. Edward Haven, had been killed in action on July 27, 1944. Mrs. Haven had sent a letter on May 14 asking for details about her son’s death. Pvt. Haven’s commanding officer, Capt. A. E. Nielsen, replied to the grieving mother on May 26, and Burkhalter responded to her a few days later. Burkhalter assured Mrs. Haven, “Edward was liked by all the men of his outfit and he did a good job as a brave soldier. As Capt. Nielsen has said, litter-bearers in combat are ‘unsung heroes of a war.’ But we, who are together on the Front, hold in high esteem our fellow soldiers who face the dangers of war along by our sides.”²¹ Burkhalter consoled Mrs. Haven and also told her that the War Department would eventually inform her of the precise location of her son’s burial in France.²² Although Burkhalter did not know the young man personally, he took the time to respond to a heartbroken mother and offered his condolences. Chaplains regularly went above and beyond the call of duty while serving in a variety of roles during the war.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gordon, “Front-Line Chaplain.”

²¹ John G. Burkhalter, letter to Mrs. Haven, May 29, 1945, *Burkhalter Collection*, Liberty University Chaplains Museum.

²² Ibid.

On a larger scale, chaplains also worked together to accomplish ministry objectives when stationed at busy bases. By July 1945, the Island Chaplain on Guam reported that 126 U.S. military chaplains, including all faiths, served on the island that month. Forty-nine of these were Army chaplains. The Island Chaplain's name was R. T. Blomquist, and in his "Island Chaplain's Report for the Island Command War Diary" covering the month of July 1945, he described the activities and duties of the chaplains on the island. The report says, "The Island Chaplain coordinates and supervises the religious activities of all chaplains on the island. It is his duty to see that all men are informed of the time and place of religious services."²³ With this leadership structure in place, it is evident that the chaplains of Guam were highly effective in their work. Blomquist stated that "Roman Catholic and Protestant services are now being held at nearly all key points on the island."²⁴ He also mentioned a religious radio program broadcast from Guam to the Americans on nearby Pacific islands, the work of Army chaplains in island hospitals and on hospital ships, and chaplain meetings on the island that month.²⁵ While working together, these chaplains proved to be very productive in their ministry.

Christian Army chaplains certainly spent a lot of time tending to the spiritual and physical needs of their men, but they also cared for their mental and emotional needs. In *Serving God and Country: U.S. Military Chaplains in World War II*, Lyle W. Dorsett writes, "A major thesis of this book is that military chaplains were absolutely essential to America's victory. Indeed, without the role played by clergy in keeping the soldiers', sailors', and marines' courage up and morale high, the enormous sacrifices required to sustain and win a war...would not have

²³ Island Command Guam, "War Diary: Volume 1," July 1945 (National Archives, Record Group 38, US, World War II War Diaries, 1941-1945), 89, Fold3, <https://www.fold3.com/image/300381165/war-diary-71-3145-page-1-us-world-war-ii-war-diaries-1941-1945>.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 90-91.

been possible.”²⁶ The U.S. War Department considered morale and character-building to be the most important roles of a military chaplain. In fact, the War Department’s 1941 technical manual, *The Chaplain*, described the “principal business” of chaplains as promoting good character and strong morale through religion or other motivations like loyalty and patriotism.²⁷ In practice, chaplains accomplished this by various means. They were occasionally required to entertain troops, especially towards the beginning of the war, by providing them with books, games, and movies.²⁸ Keeping soldiers’ spirits high was a top priority for the Army.

Chaplains also took responsibility for the moral health of their men. Many Army chaplains viewed activities such as drinking, gambling, and sex as detrimental to the well-being of their troops. There were notable disagreements among Christian chaplains of different denominational backgrounds concerning the morality of consuming alcohol. For example, Catholic chaplains generally held more permissive views of drinking than Baptist chaplains.²⁹ However, chaplains tried to discourage their men from participating in these undesirable behaviors. Army chaplains were required to give “Sex and Hygiene” lectures warning against the physical and emotional harm caused by having sex with local women. Some appealed to biblical commands, while others spared no details in describing and showing pictures of how sexually transmitted diseases can infect men.³⁰ Chaplains understood that many of their soldiers would drink, gamble, and have sex with prostitutes anyway, but they did their best to provide them with moral guidance.

²⁶ Lyle W. Dorsett, *Serving God and Country: U.S. Military Chaplains in World War II* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2012), 6.

²⁷ Michael Snape, *God and Uncle Sam: Religion and America's Armed Forces in World War II* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2015. ProQuest), 86.

²⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

²⁹ Jenel Virden, “Warm Beer and Cold Canons: US Army Chaplains and Alcohol Consumption in World War II,” *Journal of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 80, JSTOR.

³⁰ Dorsett, *Serving God and Country*, 43.

Finally, Christian chaplains cared for the emotional needs of their men by individually counseling them. Dorsett explains that “chaplains did their best to create a small space that became a home away from home, offering themselves as listening and caring father figures to the throngs of men and women who sorely missed the warmth of hearth and home.”³¹ One-on-one meetings were perhaps the most effective setting in which Christian chaplains could tend to the spiritual, mental, and emotional needs of those in their charge. By 1942, Army chaplains held an average of fifty-three individual meetings each day. Studies conducted during the war and confirmed after its conclusion demonstrated that soldiers visited their chaplain more than any other officer besides their commanding officer.³² Christian chaplains leaned on their training and experience in pastoral counseling to offer their men a listening ear and biblical wisdom in a friendly manner. When soldiers faced problems or difficulties, their comrades often told them to “tell it to the chaplain.” Although this phrase was used in a cynical way, it became a common expression during World War II because servicemen learned that they were supposed to take their issues to their chaplain.³³ Chaplains encouraged and counseled their men in many ways to tend to their mental and emotional needs throughout the war.

In conclusion, U.S. Army chaplains of the Christian faith selflessly served God and their country in World War II by caring for the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional needs of the soldiers in their charge. Chief of Chaplains William Arnold contributed to the transformation of the Army chaplaincy during the war by effectively recruiting, training, and administrating chaplains of all faiths. Catholic and Protestant chaplains like Monsignor Finnegan, Rev. Daniel Jr., and Rev. Burkhalter tended to their men spiritually and physically by leading them in prayer

³¹ Ibid., 44.

³² Snape, *God and Uncle Sam*, 108.

³³ Ibid., 108-9.

and religious services, teaching them about the Bible, visiting them on their hospital beds, and recovering the bodies of their fallen comrades. Christian chaplains also prioritized the mental and emotional needs of their division's troops by boosting morale in various ways, encouraging them to maintain a strong moral character, and personally counseling them in times of hardship. Just as the United States was founded as a Christian nation, so too was its military chaplaincy established in the Christian faith. Christian chaplains, both Protestant and Catholic, have always been the most numerous in the U.S. military because they represent the predominant religion of their country. From the Four Chaplains to the chaplains on Guam near the end of the war, the Christian Army chaplains of World War II glorified God and deserve to be remembered as part of America's Christian heritage.

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